

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

It is important for Children's Service Workers to make sure that they are functioning at their most efficient level. Staff who are panicked, overwhelmed, or self-righteously angry are working with a severe handicap in their efforts to help a family become calm and learn problem-solving skills. This chapter will discuss those things a worker can do to prevent worker burnout.

Self Awareness and Positive Self Talk

Albert Ellis' Rational Emotive Therapy (RET) is a valuable framework to use in trying to become as clear and calm as possible before going out to work with a family in crisis. The basic idea of RET is that our feelings are not a product of the particular situation we face, but rather of what we tell ourselves about the situation. For example, if the Children's Service Worker says to him/herself, "I'm so scared, I will probably faint when these people answer the door," he/she will make a less calm and organized entrance. More positive self-talk is "This looks like a difficult situation. I will just do the best I can. I know many approaches to try, and even if I cannot do the most perfect job, I may still be able to help this family."

One of the most helpful concepts is what Ellis calls "rational beliefs" about one's job, oneself, and one's clients. Rational beliefs are logical and based on facts. They help us feel the way we want and get the outcome we desire. Rational beliefs involve a good deal of consideration for others.

Irrational beliefs distort the facts, often emphasizing only the negatives. Some of the more common irrational beliefs are:

- People must love and approve of me and what I do.
- Making mistakes is terrible.
- People should be condemned for their errors.
- It's terrible when things go wrong.
- Threatening situations must keep me terribly worried.
- I should be thoroughly competent, intelligent and effective in all areas.
- Things have to be fair.

Usually irrational beliefs are just good ideas that are so distorted that we function less effectively due to the additional pressure we place on ourselves. For example, the rational belief "I'd like to do a good job" can be distorted in the high pressure idea "I've got to do everything exactly right." "I'd like to be able to work with most clients," becomes "I must be successful with all clients." "I'd like things to be clear," becomes

"They have to let me know exactly what I should do," and "I don't like some things that are happening," is transformed into "They shouldn't do that to me."

It is important to be aware of our potential for such irrational beliefs so that we can challenge them, reduce our negative emotions, and free our energy for work with families. Identify the unpleasant emotions you are feeling. Specify some emotional beliefs which may be involved. Find other, more comfortable ways of conceptualizing the situation. The list below presents some common irrational ideas associated with feelings of anxiety, depression, or anger. These are followed by alternative beliefs which can alleviate them.

Irrational

**If I can't do it perfectly
I shouldn't do it at all.**

**I must succeed in all cases.
If I don't, I'm a lousy
Children's Service
Worker and a worthless person**

I should have done better.

**I should be a good therapist
and if I'm not I'm less of a person.**

I will never be able to do

Rational

**I will never do it perfectly.
My work can still be worthwhile,
even if it's not perfect.**

Who made up these rules?

**a. If I don't have a perfect track
record, that means I didn't
perform as well as I had hoped.
That's unfortunate, but not
catastrophic. Not succeeding can
even give me information, if I'm
open to it.**

**b. My job performance is
independent, or at least only a
small part of what makes up my
worth as a person."**

**I wish I had handled situations
differently. But maybe I couldn't
have done things differently in
that context. It's not the end of
the world if things proceed more
slowly than I wish.**

**Skills as a counselor do not
directly transfer all the time, to
value as a human being. I'm too
much of a perfectionist when I say
"all the time." Like everyone else,
I am fallible.**

I may not ever be as good as the

as well as others.

others, but that doesn't mean my work is no good or that I'm a worthless person. There are ways that I can try to improve my performance.

I am not good enough for this job.

I have this job now. Someone thought I was qualified. Where is my evidence that I'm not good enough. I might be able to improve my skills by asking my supervisor for help.

This family should be more motivated.

Others are fallible too. Demanding that they be motivated won't help them change. The family has a right to be wrong.

It's not fair.

The world isn't fair and that's okay. There is no reason things should be easy for me.

One of the recurring problems involved in human services is that helping persons often have developed strong beliefs that they should be able to do everything perfectly. They believe that they should not need help. Supervisors and fellow Children's Service Workers should challenge these notions. Offer support from the day a new worker begins. Support and questioning of unreasonable self-demands should continue for everyone involved in working with troubled families.

Providing Family-Centered Service is a difficult job. We will never know everything we would like to know. We will never be able to implement everything we do know. Although it does get better, there is always the element of surprise and the risk of the unexpected. The same factors which make Family-Centered Service exciting and meaningful also make it demanding.

Children's Service Worker Needs

The demanding, unpredictable and stressful nature of work with families in their homes has long-term effects on staff. Several factors help sustain Family-Centered Children's Service Workers. They are urged to plan for adequate nurture for themselves and to seek supervisory consultation when feeling powerless, isolated, or frustrated.

It is a rewarding experience to see even limited progress by families who have been discarded as hopeless. Children's Service Workers experience real gratification from their frequent presence with the family, from their continuity of relationship with family members, and from being able to help with the problems which are most important to the families they serve.

Ultimately, the most important factor in preventing Children's Service Worker burnout is unquestionably the increased likelihood of success which Family-Centered Services achieve. Seeing families learn to change and cope gives workers feelings of satisfaction and empowerment that go a long way to support their continued commitment to Family-Centered Services.

Stress Management Strategies

Stress is the discrepancy between what is and what is wanted. Develop an action plan and integrate this plan into daily activities. Some messages and activities that should be listed include:

1. Deep Breathing
2. Take Control
3. You Create Your Own Life
4. I COUNT TOO!
5. Take Care of Your Body - You Only Have One
5. Know What Results You Want
7. Turn Stressors into Stimulators
8. Leave No Unfinished Business

There are many hidden stressors in our work. They often lead to achievement anxiety. Do not create unreasonable discrepancies. You do not have to be perfect. You do not need to always please others. Know your own realistic expectations.

Taking Control

When you are in control stress levels are significantly reduced. Learn to take control over events and interpret them with control. Manage your life and your thoughts. Do not be afraid of asking for help. Recognize choices and alternatives.

What we focus on creates discrepancies. Examine things and decide if the issue is really important. If something jeopardizes your physical or emotional welfare, or if it threatens your safety, take a stand. If it does not, assess the issue to see if it really matters.

Making Choices

Examine the issues and events in your life that have become aggravating. If they are insignificant, let them go. If they are important, actively seek a resolution to the problems. Never take a stand on an issue if you are not willing to follow through later.

Remember, you cannot fix everything. You are learning and teaching coping skills.

Ten Major Stressors for Professionals

1. Balancing personal and professional life;
2. Concern with advancement - getting ahead;
3. Financial concerns;
4. Intimate relationships;
5. Generalized job-induced stress;
6. Residence move - living conditions;
7. Super "person" syndrome;
8. Looking for a new job;
9. Not enough recognition on the job; and
10. Time pressures at work.

(Taken from 1987 National Survey, Bee Epstein, Ph.D.)

How and When to Dig an Emotional "Foxhole"

Sometimes we are hit from so many pressures and negativity that we need the adult equivalent of Linus' blanket. Here are some suggestions for what to do when the world is coming down on you:

- Imagine yourself in a calm and peaceful place, a mental "Shangri-La". Stay in that place for a while. Imagining a quiet natural scene will reduce your stress significantly.
- When it is time to face the real world, do so with affirmations. Say positive things to yourself and about yourself, such as "I can stay calm during stressful situations."

Positive Addictions - How to Get Hooked

What are positive addictions? They are things that are good for you. Laughter is a perfect example of a positive addiction. Laughter turns off the emergency stress system, promotes healing, lights up our faces, relaxes muscles, restores objectivity, and enhances hope. Dr. Ashton Trice of the Mary Baldwin College has found that humor has mood-altering effects. Subjects were given a frustrating task. Then, one-half were shown cartoons. Those who had the cartoons overcame their frustration and approached a new test with fresh enthusiasm and confidence. Those subjects who had not had the humorous interlude continued to exhibit symptoms of stress and frustration.

Prevent Energy Drains

Some people are able to perform at their peak consistently. Their secret may lie in their attitude. Negative attitudes are a terrible drain on energy. Ask yourself if you are prone to the following energy drains:

- Denial syndrome: You bemoan the fact that things are not as you feel they should be.
- Procrastination syndrome: Even though you may think you are "putting something off" your subconscious does not let you off the hook. This creates anxiety. Procrastination takes energy. You have to figure out how long you can wait and still make a deadline.
- "What will the boss think?" syndrome. Trying to second-guess all the time can be debilitating, not to mention futile. Clarify what the boss expects and then do it without undue speculation.

Coping With Deadlines, Priorities, and Hassles

The major causes of going crazy over deadlines are procrastination and perfectionism. A deadline is simply a time frame allotted to a task. The first step when you receive a project with a deadline is to establish what you want to achieve. Be specific. List the action steps you will need to take in order of their importance. Do the most important steps first. Assign a time frame to each step. Move steadily from step to step. Avoid perfectionism. Trying to be perfect takes an incredible amount of energy. You do not need to be perfect in order to be effective. Twenty percent of your efforts achieve eighty percent of your results. Finally, do not forget to enlist the help of others if you need it.

- How you can cope when several people come to you with "top priorities:"

Be clear on your own goals and priorities. Then, choose to do first the tasks that are most in line with those priorities. How about when you report to more than one supervisor? Ask them to clarify priorities between them.

- Ever find yourself with an "Anger Hangover"?

This is when you keep replaying stressful moments over and over again in your mind. If you catch yourself doing this, STOP. Your body reacts to what your mind perceives. Even though your mind is merely thinking about a stressful event, your body will respond with the same stress reaction as if it actually were happening. Do not replay those stressful moments and compound your stress.

- A simple way for keeping daily hassles to a minimum - and feeling less frustrated by them:

When running errands, do them at off-peak hours so that you do not have to wait in lines. Bring along something else to do in case you are delayed. That way, you will not think of it as wasted time. You will focus on something else, not your anger. Deep breathing always helps relieve your rising stress level. Do not forget positive self-talk.

Handling Conflicts

Conflict is inevitable. It is simply not possible for everyone to always agree on everything and problems never to occur. Here are some of the reasons why conflicts occur:

- People do not have the same information;
- People have different perceptions of the problem; or
- People have divergent goals or values.

There are various styles for handling conflicts; each appropriate in certain situations. Sometimes a conflict is not worth the fight. In this case it will be easier for you to withdraw or give in. If the conflict is very important to you, confront the person or situation assertively. Arriving at a consensus is important. Using compromise as a solution is often the method to choose. The most advanced style of handling conflict is collaboration. This style is appropriate when both the issue and the relationship are important. It is a win/win style in which you each reveal openly relevant needs, separate people from the problem. Use "I" messages, and truly listen.

The Supervisor's Role in Minimizing Stress

The following list contains hints that may be useful to the supervisor in minimizing stress within the workplace.

1. Be aware of your staff's work load.
2. Give staff plenty of advance notice of deadlines.
3. Do not impose last-minute requests unless it is an emergency and you:

- a. Acknowledge the inconvenience and pressure; and
 - b. Express appreciation for taking on the request.
4. Keep staff informed of what is going on in the agency, particularly at times of change or uncertainty.
5. Let staff know where they stand in terms of the quality of their work, in the organization and with you.
6. See to it that staff are adequately trained for their jobs.
7. Meet with your staff to define expectations and goals, areas of responsibility, and limits of authority.
8. Reinforce people for doing jobs well.
9. Encourage staff to take adequate breaks, maintain healthy habits, and take care of themselves physically.
10. Be aware of the signs of excess stress and watch for them in your staff.
11. Be aware of your own level of stress and practice stress reduction techniques yourself.

Sources:

Segments of this chapter were obtained from Placement Prevention and Family Reunification: A Handbook for the Family-Centered Service Practitioner, authored by June C. Lloyd and Marvin E. Bryce with assistance from LaVonne Schulze, published by The National Resource Center on Family Based Services, Revised 1984, Chapter 14.

Other sources are cited in the text.

MEMORANDA HISTORY: